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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000065

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, H, EEB (AMB. MANN)
PLEASE PASS TO USTDA DAN STEIN
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: SENATOR RICHARD LUGAR AND FOREIGN
MINISTER MEREDOV, JANUARY 12, 2008

REF: ASHGABAT 0062

1. (C) SUMMARY: SUMMARY: During a positive and businesslike meeting on January 12, Foreign Minister Meredov told Senator Lugar Turkmenistan

-- has designed its new foreign policy to further expand and deepen relations in the world, focuses on improving regional relations (especially with Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan), and pays special attention to the "powerful countries" -- Russia, China, and the United States;

-- desires to expand its security relationship with the United States, but asks that Washington be patient as Ashgabat reviews and carefully vets all the new proposals on the table;

-- takes keen interest in Afghanistan and seeks to play a bigger role in reconstruction, especially electricity and transportation;

-- has proposed a Pipeline Security Convention to the United Nations, in part, because of the desire for a Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline;

-- understands the visa regime needs modernizing, but the current system is in place to "maintain order" and prevent those who look for "negative information" about Turkmenistan; and

-- welcomes Senator Lugar's suggestion that conditions should be created for President Berdimuhamedov to visit Washington.
END SUMMARY.

2. (C) In a nearly hour-long positive and businesslike meeting on January 12 with SFRC Minority Chairman Senator Richard Lugar and his staff, Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov described Turkmenistan's foreign

policy in detail. The goal is to build new and deepen old relations with a broad number of countries, with a special focus on major international organizations like the United Nations. Meredov said Ashgabat "continuously nurtures" its relationships with neighboring states, because it is so important to maintain them. He said Turkmenistan pays special attention to its relations with "powerful countries," and listed Russia, China, and the United States. He commented President Berdimuhamedov's extensive foreign travel during his first year in office is evidence of Turkmenistan's new emphasis on its foreign relations.

BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP POSITIVE AND WILL DEVELOP FURTHER, BUT BE PATIENT

13. (C) Meredov noted President Berdimuhamedov's visit to New York for the UNGA last September included "a very good set of bilateral meetings," and emphasized the constructive talks he held with Secretary Rice. Meredov said his government wanted to emphasize to U.S. representatives that relevant ministries are now working to implement much of what was discussed in September. On education, the government is examining all U.S. proposals with the intention of making some decisions soon and moving forward on them. Further, Turkmenistan wants to develop a deeper relationship on security cooperation. As a neutral country, Turkmenistan wants to expand its role in assisting in the battle against 21st century threats, especially terrorism, narcotics, and transnational crime. Alluding to the U.S. tendency to be impatient, he noted clearly that some proposals can be reviewed quickly, but others take time, since they require deeper consideration and more comprehensive vetting as

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Turkmenistan works to develop its new directions. He expressed appreciation for everyone's patience as the process continues.

DEEPENING INTEREST IN AFGHAN PROJECTS

14. (C) Meredov said there was a great potential for U.S.-Turkmen cooperation on Afghanistan, because although it is a complex problem, it is a neighboring state. He noted the work of the United States and other members of the international community to rebuild Afghanistan's society and infrastructure. Turkmenistan also sees a role for itself in helping to rebuild Afghanistan, given the country's substantial ethnic Turkmen population. Turkmenistan is already working cooperatively with the Afghan government on electricity issues, and forgave \$4 million of Afghanistan's electricity-related debts during President Karzai's official visit to Ashgabat in 2007. "That was nothing for us," he commented, "but was major for Afghanistan."

15. (C) Meredov recounted Turkmenistan had discussed transportation infrastructure with Afghan officials in 2007. As a result, Turkmenistan had repaired the old rail line between the Turkmen border town of Kushka and Herat in Afghanistan. He said his government also is interested in USAID's electricity proposals in which Turkmenistan could play a role in providing power to the grid that would parallel Afghanistan's ring road. He suggested Afghan officials should renew their efforts to reach agreement with Turkmenistan on this project.

TAP IS DRIVER FOR PIPELINE SECURITY CONVENTION PROPOSAL

16. (C) Meredov raised the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAP) project that the Turkmen government has been advocating. He noted U.S. companies had been involved in earlier-year preliminary discussions. While well aware that such a project was burdened with many pitfalls -- especially security in Afghanistan and the complexities of transporting hydrocarbons across Afghan, Pakistani, and Indian borders -- he judged it would be a good project for political, economic, and social reasons. The issue of pipeline security is

relevant for all the countries involved in the project, he said, and implied the United States should support President Berdimuhamedov's recent call for a new UN convention on pipeline security. Neighboring states have already indicated their support for such a convention, he added. "This is a pipeline-rich region. Countries rich with oil and gas understand the need for pipeline security."

DEVELOPMENTS WITH UZBEKISTAN AND AZERBAIJAN

¶7. (C) Meredov noted Turkmenistan has steadily improved its relations with Uzbekistan. President Karimov's official visit to Turkmenistan late in 2007 went very well. A newly-established Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan Intergovernmental Commission on economic and trade issues will meet in Ashgabat on January 31. An economic exhibition sponsored by the commission will also take place then. Likewise, the first meeting of the Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan Intergovernmental Commission will be on January 17. Meredov underscored that these meetings are to be robust and substantive sessions from which his government will expect concrete results for advancing bilateral issues, especially economic. He noted the special emphasis the Turkmen government has put on its relationship with Azerbaijan. In July, September, and November 2007, experts from both countries had met for substantive discussions on Caspian delimitation. He expected another one of these technical-level meetings to take place very soon, and pointed to their regularity as an indication

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of the priority the government has placed on resolving the delimitation issue.

VISA REGIME MAINTAINS ORDER AND PREVENTS NEGATIVE PUBLICITY

¶8. (C) Senator Lugar commented the American people know little about Turkmenistan, but its reputation is expanding due to its broad efforts to end its long political isolation and to develop economically. He emphasized he understands Turkmenistan will develop at its own pace, but hoped the government would eventually simplify its visa regime to make it easier for business people, students, and especially tourists to visit this distinctive country.

¶9. (C) Meredov replied, "We limit contacts not to be isolationist but to maintain order." However, he added, Turkmenistan is examining its visa procedures to see if it's possible to bring them more in line with international standards, especially because the government supports "people-to-people relations." He cited the U.S. sister cities exchange program as a positive example, and noted Turkmenistan already has many friends in the United States, like the California-based Baptist "Friends of Turkmenistan" group that "visits once or twice a year." He quickly added that there were more examples he could cite. He agreed that businessmen, students, and tourists with "good intentions" should be able to visit Turkmenistan. "We simply ask that they come as friends and not have ulterior motives." Meredov praised past visits to the United States by Turkmen government officials, students, and military representatives. He added pointedly, "They didn't go to the United States to look for negative information to bring back here. I emphasize this because it is an important issue for us." (COMMENT: Meredov's initial response about "maintaining order" is probably the key issue, but it's clear the government is still smarting from the years of bad press during the Niyazov era." END COMMENT.)

BILATERAL RELATIONS SHOULD NOT BE A BUMPY RIDE

¶10. (C) Senator Lugar noted our good bilateral relations, and mused it's disappointing sometimes relations between countries can be damaged by simply a minor controversy. He said he hopes Turkmenistan trusts U.S. intentions. Meredov agreed that sometimes things happen, but the principle of cooperation should override minor issues. Senator Lugar

repeated his suggestion (reftel) that Meredov and President Berdimuhamedov should visit Washington, and elsewhere in the United States. He said, "The conditions can be created for a broader visit than you had in September in New York." Meredov responded he had discussed this with the president and recalled Berdimuhamedov had told him, "We have to work on this." Meredov said he appreciated the sincere invitation and that we'd work on this together. Almost as an afterthought, Meredov added Turkmenistan has more reforms in the offing that will be revealed this year. Senator Lugar responded it has been heartening to watch Turkmenistan's progress.

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Although long-winded, Meredov's comprehensive tour d'horizon of Turkmenistan's foreign relations was an instructive seminar on post-Niyazov foreign policy. It would be useful for USAID Afghanistan and USAID/CEN to renew efforts to bring Turkmenistan and Afghanistan to agreement on electricity. Meredov's comments about Turkmen visas revealed a good deal of old-think -- the authoritarian impulse to "maintain order" and to prevent negative publicity about the country. Though Meredov responded less effusively than President Berdimuhamedov to Senator Lugar's suggestion that the president should visit

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Washington, he put himself on the record that he would work toward that goal. END COMMENT.

¶12. (U) CODEL Lugar did not have an opportunity to clear this cable but authorized its transmission.
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